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Conservation Groups Petition for Stronger Agassiz's Desert Tortoise Protections

SACRAMENTO (March 23, 2020) – Today, Defenders of Wildlife, along with the Desert Tortoise Council and Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, submitted a petition to the California Fish and Game Commission to change the listing status of Agassiz's desert tortoise from threatened to endangered. The petition recommends the tortoise be listed as endangered under the California Endangered Species Act due to severe, ongoing population declines in California associated with land use impacts, habitat loss and fragmentation, invasive non-native plants, climate change and other challenges.

Pamela Flick, California program director for Defenders of Wildlife, issued this statement:

“Agassiz's desert tortoise is dangerously close to extinction in California wildlands and we will lose it the species unless stronger conservation measures are taken immediately. Threats to the tortoise and its habitat from unmanaged off-road vehicle use, development and climate change are ongoing and increasing. Current measures to minimize impacts have failed to stop severe population declines. Agencies should increase measures to avoid impacts to the species and accelerate mitigation efforts to reverse the troubling decline of California's state reptile.”

Ron Berger, President of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, said:

“From the 1970s through the 1990s, the West Mojave population declined by 90%, with an 85% decline in the Colorado desert. From 2004 to 2014, the decline rates varied by desert region: 50.7% for the Western, Central, and Southern Mojave combined, 36.3% for the Colorado desert, and 56.1% in the Ivanpah Valley of the Eastern Mojave Desert. Clearly, stronger protection now is essential to prevent extinction in the wild.”

Ed LaRue, Ecosystems Advisory Committee chair for the Desert Tortoise Council, stated:

“The Desert Tortoise Council (Council) is very pleased to join Defenders and the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee to petition to change the listing of Agassiz's desert tortoise (tortoise) from threatened to endangered under the California Endangered Species Act. Having worked toward advancing science-based approaches to conservation of tortoises since before 1975, the Council sees this petition as an opportunity to strengthen protection of tortoises at the state level during a time when some protections at the federal level have been compromised. Current land management and federal Endangered Species Act enforcement have failed to curtail declines of tortoise populations and protect their habitats, and recent federal land management decisions have resulted in increased levels of human actions and activities that are not conducive to tortoise conservation or recovery. We are hopeful that this new listing will provide effective conservation of the tortoise and its habitat so that current and future generations are able to learn from, appreciate, and enjoy California's state reptile.”

Multimedia: Defenders of Wildlife's Center for Conservation Innovation created an [interactive story map](#) where users can explore a visual guide to threats facing the desert tortoise as well as conservation measures designed to help recover the species throughout its range.

Background:

- The Desert tortoise was listed as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act in 1989, and under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1990.
- A recovery plan prepared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for this federally listed species was adopted in 1994, with Critical Habitat concurrently designated. A revised [recovery plan](#) was adopted in 2011, noting distinct problems in responsible agencies implementing previous recovery plan actions.
- According to a 2018 [study](#), adult tortoise population numbers have dropped by over 50% in some recovery areas since 2004, and by as much as 80-90% in some habitats since approximately 1980.

Tortoise population declines in the western Mojave Desert have been especially severe, due primarily to unmanaged off-highway vehicle use, grazing of wildlands by domestic livestock, human-subsidized raven predation, contagious disease spread, expansion and upgrading of highways, and utility maintenance projects, as well as extended droughts likely associated with climate change.

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Defenders of Wildlife is dedicated to the protection of all native animals and plants in their natural communities. With over 1.8 million members and activists, Defenders of Wildlife is a leading advocate for innovative solutions to safeguard our wildlife heritage for generations to come. For more information, visit [Defenders.org/newsroom](https://defenders.org/newsroom) and follow us on Twitter [@Defenders](https://twitter.com/Defenders).

The Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc. (DTPC) is a grass-roots, non-profit organization formed in 1974 and dedicated to protecting the welfare of the threatened desert tortoise and other species that share its habitat. DTPC is involved in species and habitat management in the California deserts through land acquisition and management, scientific research, and educational outreach. DTPC works with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and other agencies and partners on these efforts. As an example, the DTPC helped establish the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTRNA) with BLM, and currently works with the BLM under a cooperative agreement to manage the area. A 2014 study showed that the densities of live tortoises were significantly higher inside the DTRNA than outside in critical habitat (6x).

The Desert Tortoise Council is a non-profit organization comprised of hundreds of professionals and laypersons who share a common concern for wild desert tortoises and a commitment to advancing the public's understanding of desert tortoise species. Established in 1975 to promote conservation of tortoises in the deserts of the southwestern United States and Mexico, the Council routinely provides information and other forms of assistance to individuals, organizations, and regulatory agencies on matters potentially affecting desert tortoises within their geographic ranges.